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## Autoimmune Diseases: Overview

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[What are autoimmune diseases?](#)[Who is at risk for getting autoimmune diseases?](#)[What are the most common symptoms of autoimmune diseases?](#)[Are chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia autoimmune diseases?](#)[What are flare ups?](#)[Are there medicines to treat autoimmune diseases?](#)[How can I manage my life now that I have an autoimmune disease?](#)[What are some things I can do to feel better?](#)[What kinds of doctors will I need to treat my autoimmune disease?](#)

See also:

- [Chronic Fatigue Syndrome](#)
- [Graves' Disease](#)
- [Hashimoto's Thyroiditis](#)
- [Lupus](#)
- [Stress and Your Health](#)

[What are autoimmune diseases?](#)

Our bodies have an immune system that protects us from disease and infection. But if you have an autoimmune disease, your immune system attacks itself by mistake, and you can get sick. Autoimmune diseases can affect

connective tissue in your body (the tissue which binds together body tissues and organs). Autoimmune disease can affect many parts of your body, like your nerves, muscles, endocrine system (system that directs your body's hormones and other chemicals), and digestive system.

**Who is at risk for getting autoimmune diseases?**  
 Most autoimmune diseases occur in women, and most often during their childbearing years. Some of these diseases also affect African American, American Indian, and Latina women more than white women. These diseases tend to run in families, so your genes, along with the way your immune system responds to certain triggers or things in the environment, affect your chances of getting one of these diseases. If you think you may have an autoimmune disease, ask your family members if they have had symptoms like yours. The good news is that if you have an autoimmune disease, there ARE things you can do to feel better!

**What are the most common symptoms of autoimmune diseases?**

There are more than 80 types of autoimmune diseases. Learning the symptoms of some of the more common autoimmune diseases can help you recognize the signs if you get one. But some autoimmune diseases share similar symptoms. This makes it hard for doctors to find out if you really have one of these diseases, and which one it might be. This can make your trip to doctors long and stressful. But if you are having symptoms that bother you, you need to persist to make sure you get relief. Below are descriptions of some common autoimmune diseases.

Disease	Symptoms	Tests to help find out if you have it
Hashimoto's thyroiditis (underactive thyroid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tiredness</li> <li>• depression</li> <li>• sensitivity to cold</li> <li>• weight gain</li> <li>• muscle weakness and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• blood test for thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• cramps</li><li>• dry hair</li><li>• tough skin</li><li>• constipation</li><li>• sometimes there are no symptoms</li></ul>	
Graves' disease (overactive thyroid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• insomnia (not able to sleep)</li><li>• irritability</li><li>• weight loss without dieting</li><li>• heat sensitivity</li><li>• sweating</li><li>• fine brittle hair</li><li>• weakness in your muscles</li><li>• light menstrual periods</li><li>• bulging eyes</li><li>• shaky hands</li><li>• sometimes there are no symptoms</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• blood test for thyroid stimulating hormone (TSH)</li></ul>

Lupus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>swelling and damage to the joints, skin, kidneys, heart, lungs, blood vessels, and brain</li> <li>“butterfly” rash across the nose and cheeks</li> <li>rashes on other parts of the body</li> <li>painful and swollen joints</li> <li>sensitivity to the sun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>exam of your body lab tests (anticellular antibody [ANA] test, blood tests, and urine tests)</li> </ul>
Multiple sclerosis (MS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>weakness and trouble with coordination, balance, speaking, and walking</li> <li>paralysis</li> <li>tremors</li> <li>numbness and tingling feeling in arms, legs, hands, and feet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>exam of your body</li> <li>exam of your brain, spinal cord, and nerves (neurological exam)</li> <li>x-ray tests (magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] and magnetic resonance spectroscopy [MRS])</li> <li>other tests on the brain and spinal cord fluid to look for things linked to</li> </ul>

		these diseases
Rheumatoid arthritis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inflammation begins in the tissue lining your joints and then spreads to the whole joint (hand joints are the most common site, but it can affect most joints in the body)</li> <li>• muscle pain</li> <li>• deformed joints</li> <li>• weakness</li> <li>• fatigue</li> <li>• loss of appetite</li> <li>• weight loss</li> <li>• becoming confined to bed in severe cases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• blood tests may show that you have anemia (when your body does not have enough red blood cells) and an antibody called rheumatoid factor (RF). (Some people with RF never get this disease, and others with the disease never have RF.)</li> </ul>

### Are chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia autoimmune diseases?

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and fibromyalgia (FM) are not autoimmune diseases, but they often have symptoms—like being tired all the time and pain—that may seem like other autoimmune diseases.

- CFS can cause you to be very tired, have trouble concentrating, feel weak, and have muscle pain.

Symptoms of CFS come and go. The cause of CFS is not known.

- FM is a disorder with symptoms of widespread muscle pain, fatigue (feeling tired and having low energy), and multiple tender points. Tender points are located in the neck, spine, shoulders, hips, and knees and are painful when pressure is applied to them. FM mainly occurs in women of childbearing age, but children, the elderly, and men are sometimes diagnosed with FM. The cause is not known.

#### **What are flare ups?**

Symptoms of autoimmune diseases can come and go, ranging in how bad they are, or all go away for a while (called remission). Flare-ups, or the sudden and severe onset of symptoms, can also happen. It's best to work closely and often with your doctor and other members of your health care team to manage your illness. If you have a flare-up, it is best to first call your doctor. Don't try a "cure" you heard about from a friend or relative.

**Are there medicines to treat autoimmune diseases?**  
You can take medicines to help your symptoms, which your doctor(s) will talk with you about. The type of medicine you take depends on which disease you have and what your symptoms are. Some people can take over-the-counter drugs, like aspirin and ibuprofen for pain. Others with more severe symptoms may have to take certain kinds of prescription drugs that can help with pain, swelling, depression, anxiety, sleep problems, fatigue, or rashes. You also might be able to take medicine to help slow the progress of your disease. New treatments for autoimmune diseases are being studied all the time.

#### **How can I manage my life now that I have an autoimmune disease?**

Although there is no cure for autoimmune diseases, you can treat your symptoms and learn to manage your disease, so you can enjoy life! Women with autoimmune diseases lead full, active lives. Your life goals should not have to change. It is important, though, to see a doctor who specializes in these types of diseases.

#### **What are some things I can do to feel better?**

If you are living with an autoimmune disease, there are

things you can do each day to feel better:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Keep your immune system as healthy as can be! The list of nutrients that you need for a healthy immune system is long. But don't try to overload on vitamins because that could be worse for your health. Try to get all you need from food, rather than from vitamin pills. Eat balanced meals with foods from all of the food groups. Include yummy fruits and vegetables and whole grains. Also eat calcium-rich foods, such as fat-free or low-fat milk and yogurt. Avoid fatty foods.
- **Get regular exercise (but be careful not to overdo it).** Thirty minutes most days of the week is best, but talk with your doctor about what types of exercise you can do. A gradual and gentle exercise program often works well for people with long-lasting muscle and joint pain. Some types of yoga or tai chi exercises may be helpful.
- **Get enough rest.** Rest allows your body tissues and joints the time they need to repair. Sleeping is a great way you can help both your body and mind. If you don't get enough sleep, your stress level and your symptoms could get worse. You also can't fight off sickness as well when you sleep poorly. With enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better and lower your risk for illness. Try to get at least seven hours of sleep every night.
- **Reduce stress and try "self" pain management.** You also might be able to lessen your pain or muscle spasms and deal with other aspects of living with your disease if you try meditation or self-hypnosis. You can learn to do these through self-help books, tapes, or with the help of an instructor. You also can use imagery (use the power of your thoughts to "destroy" your pain) or distract your focus on your pain by doing a hobby or something else you enjoy.

**You have some power to lessen  
your pain!**

**Try using *Imagery* for 15 minutes,  
two or three times each day.**

1. Put on your favorite calming music.
2. Lie back on your favorite chair or sofa. Or if you are at work, sit back and relax in your chair.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Imagine your pain or discomfort.
5. Imagine something that confronts this pain and watch it "destroy" the pain.

What kinds of doctors will I need to treat my autoimmune disease?

Juggling your health care needs among different doctors and other types of health care providers can be hard. But visiting other types of health care workers, along with your main doctor, may be helpful in managing some symptoms of your autoimmune disease. If you are visiting many types of health care workers, make sure you have a supportive main doctor to help you. Often, your family doctor may help you coordinate care. Here are some other kinds of health care workers that may be useful.

- **Nephrologist.** A doctor who will look at how well your kidneys are working. Kidneys are organs that clean the blood and produce urine.
- **Rheumatologist.** A doctor who specializes in arthritis and other diseases.
- **Endocrinologist.** A doctor who specializes in diseases that affect your glands (organs in your body that make hormones). Glands help control the body's reproduction, energy levels, weight, food and waste

production, and growth and development.

- **Physical therapist.** A health care worker who can help you with stiffness, weakness, restricted body movement, and with finding out the proper level of exercise for your body.
- **Occupational therapist.** A health care worker who can help you find devices or make changes in your home or workplace to make life easier for you. They also can teach you ways to do all you have to despite your pain and other health problems.
- **Speech therapist.** A health care worker who can be helpful for people with MS who have speech problems.
- **Vocational therapist.** A health care worker who offers job training for people who cannot do their current jobs because of their illness or other health problems. You can find this type of person through both public and private agencies.
- **Counselor for emotional support.** A health care worker who is specially trained to help you to find ways to cope with your illness. You can work through your feelings of anger, fear, denial, and frustration.
- **Support groups.** Some women find that talking with others who have the same health problem is helpful in finding new ways to cope with it.
- **Chiropractor.** A type of doctor who might be helpful in relieving some of your symptoms, such as muscle spasms and backaches. But you should only see this type of doctor along with your regular autoimmune disease doctor, not in place of him or her.

#### **For More Information . . .**

For more information about autoimmune diseases, contact the National Women's Health Information Center at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

#### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), NIH, HHS**

Phone: (877) 226-4267

Internet Address: <http://www.nih.gov/about/almanac/>

[organization/NIAMS.htm](#)

**National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), NIH, HHS**  
Phone: (800) 352-9424  
Internet Site: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov>

**American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association (AARDA), Inc.**  
Phone: (800) 598-4668  
Internet Address: <http://www.aarda.org>

**Lupus Foundation of America (LFA), Inc.**  
Phone: (800) 558-0121  
Internet Site: <http://www.lupus.org>

**Thyroid Foundation of America (TFA), Inc.**  
Phone: (800) 832-8321  
Internet Address: <http://www.tsh.org>

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